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TWO LIVES – THE POLITICAL DESTINY OF A NATIONAL PARK

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TWO LIVES - THE POLITICAL DESTINY OF A NATIONAL PARK

by Peter Lindenmann

In 1996 a new South African National Park was created in the far north of the country. The name Vhembe-Dongola is an allusion to the first life of roughly the same area as a National Park under the designation Dongola Wildlife Sanctuary in the 1940s. Due to political strife, this first life was very short and the Dongola Wildlife Sanctuary was the first South African National Park ever to be deproclaimed. Half a century later, after another change of government, the time was right for a second life, since the magic of the ancient city of Mapungubwe fitted well into the African Renaissance program of the New South Africa. On the third of July 2003 the park was proclaimed a world heritage site to protect its Cultural and Natural resources internationally (Bernard van Lente, e-mail: 1.1.2004).

In 1871 the surveyor H.J. Grobler (Doc. 1), on behalf of the administration of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR), traveled to the Limpopo River Valley and laid down a grid of farms in the fever ridden, tsetse infested lowveldt. The floodplains were lifeless, as the ivory trade had exterminated the native elephant population during the previous 30 years. The enterprise was heroic, but virtual, considering that the last white settlers, the boers at Schoemansdal on the other side of the Zoutpansberg, had been driven out by Makhado four years before. The Venda were only defeated by the Boers in 1898 (Wagner 1987:315-319). Even then nobody thought of moving down into the hot river valley. Only hunters and traders ventured in to this area and only ever for brief periods during favorable seasons. Nothing but the curious names of the farms, Schroda, Breslau, Greefswald etc. remind today of the German surveyor.

The farm Schroda, District of Zoutpansberg, Ward Mara, Transvaal Colony, Original Survey 17. April 1871, was granted to a G.C.A. van Dam and resurveyed in September 1905. The Survey was gazetted on the 23. November 1906 and confirmed on the 26. February 1907 (Doc.1). Actual settlement took place only some ten years later, when the Union Government opened the area as the last part of the Transvaal for poor whites, after the construction of the railway to Messina in 1913 (Doc.2). This settlement initiative was a failure from the beginning. Ecological conditions in the Limpopo Valley had changed dramatically in the 1000 years since they had permitted the establishment of the city at Mapungubwe. At present the area was prone to severe droughts, with an annual rainfall of some 300 ml (Internet 1), and in the bushveldt farming proved impossible without irrigation. Even after the eradication of the Tsetse flies during the course of the rinderpest

in 1896, cattle could only be supported in very low numbers, otherwise degrading the fragile ecosystem at a staggering speed.

Jan C. Smuts, Boer General, Politician and Amateur Botanist maintained a Bushveld Camp in the area and were well aware of the immense biodiversity in the Limpopo Valley and the danger incurred by careless cattle ranching. He was able to keep 9 farms from being settled in 1919 (Doc.3). They remained government property and in 1922 became part of the Dongola Botanical Reserve that was declared at this time. Its aim was to study the vegetation and the agricultural potential of the region (Maphasa and Bester 2001:11).

In 1932 the farmer Van Graan discovered the archeological site of Mapungubwe on the farm Greefswald (Gaigher 2002:5). The ruins of an African city that was home to about 5'000 citizen during its heyday in the 13th century not only caused a stir in the academic community, but ran also contrary to the Boer legitimization myth of a parallel arrival in the 17th century of Boers (van Riebeek) and Africans (Bantu) from the north in to South Africa, both dislodging the earlier Khoisan inhabitants (Internet 2). The farm Greefswald was purchased by the Union Government and the University of Pretoria obtained exclusive exploration rights (Maphasa and Bester 2001:2).

In reaction to the argument that agriculture, including ranching, was unsustainable; that landowners were absent and; the bushveld was already sensitive to degradation, Smuts, his minister of Agriculture Conroy and the walisian Botanist I.B. Pole Evans (Internet 3) promoted a project of a Dongola Wildlife Sanctuary from 1929 onwards (Doc.4). According to Mr. Rooth, member of parliament for the district of Zoutpansberg, most of these farms were settled from 1918 onwards. Already in 1922 a government commission had to reevaluate the prices of the farms to prevent exaggerated growth of the owners' debts. These dept control measures had to be repeated in the following years. The settlers were not worse off than elsewhere but the land was too dry (Doc.4). Carrying capacity was estimated to one head of cattle per 17 hectares at the time.

A "Report on the commission of inquiry in the Game Preservation in the Transvaal" for the Dongola Wildlife Sanctuary in the 1940ies concluded that the population consisted of about one European per 20 Square miles. During less than 30 years of settlement about 50% of the original grassland cover had been destroyed and on the 123 farms affected by the project there where only 24 resident owners. Most of them weren't even "real settlers", but more interested in hunting and shooting. The report ends with an elaboration of farms and their annual income (Doc.2).

An important part of the project was the enlargement of the sanctuary over the South African Borders into the adjoining British Colonies of Bechuanaland and Rhodesia. Deliberations took place with Sir Evelyn Baring Governor of Bechuanaland Protectorate and Geoffrey Huggins and Sir Ellis Robbins, the then Prime Minister and Governor of Rhodesia. Both territories promised to join the interstate sanctuary as it was termed then, with the Tuli Block and the Elwes Block respectively (Doc.5/Doc.6).

The issue was brought before the Union Parliament in a hurry and despite a hot debate that was remembered as "the Battle of Dongola" Smuts had his way before the all-important next election. The Dongola Wildlife Sanctuary Act No 6 of 1947 instated a new South African National Park (Maphasa and Bester 2001:11). I.B. Pole Evans became Chief Warden and Director with a monthly allowance of 1100 L, Senator Conroy, J. Stuart Franklin, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, Dr. Bernard Price and H. J. van der Byl were Members of the board and an overseer and 46 workers were hired (Doc.7). From 1948 on the documents talk of the Jan Smuts Wildlife Sanctuary (Doc.6). The Park existed only for one and a half years. In 1948 a general election ousted the Smuts Government and put the National Party led by Malan in its place. The new regime deproclaimed the Dongola Wildlife Sanctuary in 1949, it was the first and only South African National Park to be deproclaimed. Even the botanical reserve that had existed since 1922 was abolished. The already purchased farms were given back to their former owners and the accumulated funds returned to the sponsors. Only the farm Greefswald was retained (Maphasa and Bester 2001:11). In 1966 a new initiative to protect at least a core area of 12 farms failed. A year later the Administrator of the Transvaal proclaimed the Vhembe Nature Reserve, consisting of the farms Greefswald 37MS, Samaria 28MS and Den Staat 27MS totaling 8746 hectares. But even this small protectorate was not to be. In 1968 the farm Greefswald was handed over to the SADF who installed a military base (Maphasa and Bester 2001:12), the Vhembe military training area, on its premises. Information on the army period is scarce. Apparently Hardekool Camp was used as a border patrol facility, as a launching pad for special operations against Zimbabwe (Internet 4), and as a hunting lodge for high ranking army and state officials (Internet 5). In the 1970s and early 1980s Greefswald became infamous as a particularly brutal rehabilitation center for drug users inside the army. This was a project of the army psychiatrist Levine (Internet 4). Because the area was considered a sensitive security zone, a so-called Kaftan (Norex) a fence was constructed along the Limpopo riverbank. This electrified border fence was doubled by an additional veterinarian fence, both damaging the sensitive riverine forests along the Limpopo greatly (Doc.8). The fence was not continuous, as it was not put up on the

original reserve farms of Greefswald, Samaria and Den Staat. According to witnesses the frontier was the scene of many violent incidents. Freedom fighters tried to enter South Africa via the Limpopo and laid land mines on the roads. At one time a group of freedom fighters crossed the river and got lost. They sought refuge amongst farm workers who informed their farmer. He called in the security forces who ambushed and killed the fighters (Interview with Alex Chauke and Ben Mathati 17.9.2002). The white farmers profited on the "terrorist threat" and the following security measures that were taken by the national government. Gravel roads received a blacktop, lone farms were integrated into the electricity and telephone grid and from 1979 onwards the Designated areas development act (Nr. 87 of 1979) brought development money in to the area. The far northern Transvaal designated area was proclaimed and an intensive irrigation system on the Limpopo floodplains was put in place. Due to lack of legislation, even on the apparently protected farms Samaria and Den Staat, the floodplains were irrigated, and an intensive culture of citrus fruits, onions, potatoes, cotton and maize replaced the extensive cattle ranching (Maphasa and Bester 2001:3). The irrigation farming brought a far greater population to the area. Some 700 people worked on Den Staat. They were paid very low salaries (starting at R 7 in 1971) and often mistreated by the farmers. Some pulled out the teeth of their workers just to let them feel pain and even recently a white farmer was arrested for having thrown a black worker into a pond full of crocodiles (Interview with Alex Chauke and Ben Mathati 17.9.2002).

Another example is the farm Balerno on the road to Ponderdrift. It was owned by two families, a doctor from Polokwane and another family from the interior. No actual farming took place here, the farm was more akin to a holiday home. A family of five persons lived as workers on the farm. Their main work was in housekeeping and guarding the property. They were paid 600 R. a month and allowed to keep their own cattle, goats and a few donkeys (Bernard van Lente, e-mail: 1.1.2004).

Things started to change, when a Consortium led by De Beers developed a new diamond mine on Venetia, some 25 miles south of the Limpopo in 1990 (Maphasa and Bester 2001:12). They installed a pumping station and a large reservoir lake on Schroda to draw the water for the mine from the Limpopo. Because the water from Greefswald was not enough, the neighboring farm Schroda was also purchased (Doc.9). Around the open pit mine an exclusion zone of 26'000 ha was designated and became the private Venetia Limpopo Nature Reserve. In a letter dated the 30th December 1993 the De Beers chairman proposed the area as part of a new national park to the minister of environmental affairs. The idea was refused due to lack of finances on March 4th 1994 (Maphasa and

Bester 2001:12). In the meantime the farm Greefswald was handed back to civil authorities ceremoniously on July 24th 1992, but in reality only on June 29th 1994 after the province government purchased another farm for the army (Maphasa and Bester 2001:4). The initiative was taken up by the new government at a cabinet meeting on 9th September 1994. The Premier of the Northern Province visited Mapungubwe early in 1995 (Doc.10) and on 9th June 1995 an agreement between the Northern Province and SANParks was reached, aiming at the installation of a new National Park at the confluence of the Limpopo and the Sashe River (Internet 1). The core area of the National Park comprises 24 farms totaling about 28'000 ha between Weipe in the east and Pongriffs in the west. The southern border is the R521 Messina-Pongriffs and in the North the Limpopo River is the boundary (Maphasa and Bester 2001:9).

The Project started in 1996 when the SANP began buying up farms and taking over the administration of others. At this time the Park is not complete, there is a block of five farms in the east and one of nine in the west, but in between parts of the puzzle are still missing (Interview with Bernard van Lente 13.9.2002). Greefswald was handed over from the Northern Province to SANP in 1996 (Internet), and the farm Schroda still belongs to De Beers, but management, with the exception of the waterworks has been taken over by SANP. Other farms, as for example the one named Mona are bought up by private ventures, in this case the Peace Park Foundation on behalf of the National Park (Interview Bernard van Lente 13.9.2002). About 4.5% of the core area is still under irrigation (Maphasa and Bester 2001:28). This is a problem, since bushveld costs about R 2000 a hectare, but the irrigation land on the floodplains is priced at R30 000 - R 100'000. However this land also has to be purchased in order to protect the riverine forests, the real biodiversity hotspot (Interview Bernard van Lente 13.9.2002). Inside the park, agriculture is abandoned, internal fences between the farms are broken down and rehabilitation measures begin. All the irrigation farms relied on large laborforces to work their land. They mostly consisted of migrant laborers from Zimbabwe, many of them illegal immigrants. When the farms are bought up they lose their job and move on to a new farm. They break down their houses to retrieve usable material. SANParks insists that no farm worker was expelled, in the contrary, all SA citizens on the farms up to now have been employed by SANParks and provided with better housing. (Bernard van Lente, e-mail: 1.1.2004) Animals in the park are still scarce. The park inherited a few from the former game ranching farms which were bought up. But already the elephants from the Tuli Block reservation in neighboring Botswana are moving back through the broken border fence. The park was fenced in 2003. Restocking is due for 2004/2005. Fences are moved with

the extension of the park, eventually there will be only an outer fence around the whole Transfrontier Conservation Area. The park received a 45'000'000 investment from the SA government in 2003, allowing completion of the park infrastructure previous to a planned opening for the general public in April 2004. The park provides employment for 650 locals with current projects (Bernard van Lente, e-mail: 1.1.2004).

Plans for the future call for a major Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA), including Vhembe-Dongola, the Tuli Block in Botswana and parts of Zimbabwe, are being made. Border posts are to be moved out of the park, allowing for free movement of visitors in all three countries. Proceedings with Botswana for the inclusion of the Tuli Block are well under way and a joint anti-poaching patrol of SANP, SAPS, Botswana and South African custom officials is already working. On the Zimbabwean side the Sentinel Ranch and Nottingham Estate, bordering the Limpopo on the opposite side of Vhembe-Dongola have been occupied by war veterans and the wildlife there including endangered Sable antelopes has been destroyed in the process. Due to the political situation the inclusion of the earmarked areas in Zimbabwe into the TFCA is estimated to be impossible in the near future, but the Memorandum of Understanding between the three countries is still being pursued. (Interview Bernard van Lente 13.9.2002).

The two lives of the Dongola National Park have astonishing parallels. Oppenheimer was a Member of the Board of the first Dongola and De Beers is an important stakeholder in the second. Even the Transfrontier aspect, the big issue of the Peace Parks was nothing new, and already the subject of diplomatic action in 1947. The issues have stayed the same as half a century ago. Even down to the designation of the area as "not useful for agriculture" and "almost uninhabited". Our time only changed interstate sanctuary for transfrontier conservation area and wilderness for biodiversity.

The example of the Vhembe-Dongola National Park shows conservation issues at the mercy of the big political changes taking place in a far away capital city. The same project was started by a first regime, became impossible under a second and has finally been resurrected by a newly elected democratic government. This time, it is to be hoped, with a longer life than before.

COMMENTARY ON THE PAPER BY BERNARD VAN LENTE, PARK MANAGER OF THE VHEMBE DONGOLA NATIONAL PARK, 01/01/2004.

In general the paper gives a concise, easily readable history of the recent politics involved in the park. It shows that Jan Smuts was a true visionary with regard to conservation, a fact which was maybe not always recognized by the previous government. The role of the

present government should also not be underestimated, particularly the role the Premier of the Province played in initiating the park during 1996, and the continued support from central government.

The paper highlights how politics and self interest can lead to the detriment of our planet. Just imagine if this park could have existed as a 100 000ha National Park since 1947.

The park, its history and the future TFCA plans are symbolic of the African Renaissance- where African countries work together for a better life for all. A thousand years ago a kingdom spanned the three countries. It is fitting that the proposed conservation area will follow the boundaries of this ancient kingdom which used to span across colonial lines on a map.

The political will is clearly there to make it a success this time!

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